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A CASTLE FOR THE COWS

By **Abby Luby**

A Rockefeller Center for dairy



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINE ASHBURN

Graceful stone arches and gothic traversing vaults conjure up ideas of medieval royalty. When those same architectural bastions are used in a modern dairy barn, there is a dramatic shift in perception about farming, from what it was to what it has become and to what it could be.

The new Churchtown Dairy in Claverack has one such barn, a great vaulted dome built as a stunning accent on a vast, pastoral landscape. From afar, this white spherical structure with its variegated, subdued gray roof arching up to its modest cupola holds a graceful simplicity that redefines the allure of the American farm.

“I wanted the Churchtown Dairy to be spectacular, to be beautiful,” says Abby Rockefeller, who owns the land and built the dairy. Rockefeller, part of a long line of philanthropic Rockefellers in the State of New York, is a longtime champion of sustainable agriculture and unprocessed food. “I wanted a place that would feel good for everyone, a place for people to come together and talk about the issues facing agriculture today, the good and the bad.”

Rockefeller often cites an inspiring quote from *A Handmade Life: In Search of Simplicity*, by William Coperthwaite, author and yurt-building enthusiast, which says, “Where there is no beauty there is great danger.”

FORTUNATELY THE MILK

The Churchtown Dairy is on 250 acres of what was, for years, vacant farmland, purchased by Rockefeller’s mother, Peggy, also a strong advocate for the return to tried-and-true farming methods. That purchase included another 2,500 acres of abandoned dairy farms in Columbia County. That New York dairy farmers were forced from their livelihood strongly resonated with Abby Rockefeller and, in the family tradition of preserving farmland and supporting sustainable agriculture, she established the Foundation for Agricultural Integrity in 2010, a small nonprofit group that manages and revives farmland.

“There is a different economy today that has driven milk farmers out because they can no longer afford to produce milk, and that’s not okay,” Rockefeller says. “Farms went under because deliberate pricing became a governmental policy [this is referring to the policy of government regulation setting the price of milk, rather than the competitive market]. There’s something wrong here and it goes very deep.”

The concept for the Churchtown Dairy was on the drawing board years before the first shovel hit the ground in 2012. Rockefeller hired architect and close friend Rick Anderson to help her design the farm. “Abby contacted me and said, ‘I want to build this farm. And it has to be beautiful,’” Anderson recalls. The directive was right up Anderson’s alley, who for years has traveled around the country dismantling and collecting old barns of faded beauty, especially the rare round ones. For Anderson, the opportunity to create a structure on a 250-acre parcel of open meadows was like having a large blank canvas where his imagination could take off.

Finally the vision for Churchtown Dairy was realized in 2014. Its circular barn with a main floor and a loft is the center point of the milking barn and farmhouse, the major components of the complex. Every structure was built to support biodynamic dairy farming, whose sustainable methods limit the number of cows on a farm to how many can be fed from what is grown on the farm.

“There’s always the question of scale when it comes to dairy farming,” Rockefeller explains. “If you have too many cows it throws off the whole pricing system because you need more people to run the farm. It’s that piece of the economy that has driven human beings away from farming. There has to be a balance.”

A synergistic wave seemed to ripple out from the round barn’s aura reaching the nearby Triform Camphill Community less than a mile down the road. Triform would supply the first few cows of what would become a 28-cow herd at Churchtown. There are 100 Camphill communities worldwide and 11 throughout the U.S., all practice biodynamic farming as part of their program to train adults with developmental disabilities. Triform Camphill was founded in 1979 and has about 90 residents living on its 450-acre campus that runs a working dairy farm, a bakery and has a community center, an auditorium and classrooms.

“Abby’s vision for the Churchtown Dairy was very close to what we are trying to do with our farm,” says Ben Davis, director of operations at Triform and who ran a biodynamic raw milk dairy farm for 12 years in England. “She was interested in a small, raw milk dairy with a real emphasis on the quality and health of the animals.”

When Churchtown Dairy was ready to receive cows from Triform early last spring, Davis says it was a day he will never forget. Escorting six horned bovines down the road required a portable, roped pen held by several people as they walked the cows to their new home. “I laugh when I think about it,” says Davis. “It was one of the craziest things I’ve ever done. Folks were singing as we walked and it was truly amazing. It was a stellar moment of how the community came together and could celebrate the simple things.”

Since last June, the herd has grown to about 28 cows with 18 new calves. In the winter, the cows reside inside the round barn where a clean layer of straw is spread on the circular floor to absorb the waste and then collected into what’s known as a bedded pack, a biodynamic practice known as the “deep litter system.” Eventually the composted straw becomes a rich fertilizer for the farmland, completing the cycle of the many sustainable practices. In the spring the cows are released to the pastures outside to graze in a rotational pattern. With the cows outside, the round barn is magically transformed into a space for human use. Placed eight inches over the hoofed turf are 70 concrete slabs weighing 300 pounds each, supported by a flat

platform attached to special pipes. This transformative floor converts the round barn into a place where people can come together. Last year Rockefeller held an open house at Churchtown Dairy in May where a large crowd attended to celebrate the dairy's official opening with food and drink, wagon rides and a performance by a bell choir. A few months later Scenic Hudson, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving and protecting the Hudson Valley, held its fundraising gala there, and in September, four regional Camphill communities came to celebrate Michaelmas, a Christian feast and celebration held in late September, by performing a play in a barn that doubled as a theater in the round.

“When you have this unique and beautiful building, why would you let it sit there all summer?” says Anderson. “We have a great space for farm-related educational talks, cultural events, musical and theatrical performances.”



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ANIMAL WELFARE

Key to the Churchtown Dairy is how the cows are cared for and nurtured. In the cold month of November, Triform residents ushered the cows into the round barn, newly carpeted with hay to bed down in their wintertime home. Holiday time saw neighbors perched in the loft above singing Christmas carols to the cows moseying around below.

Triform apprentices milk the cows twice a day. According to Davis some cows are milked by hand and others use an electric pump. The milking barn is a long, white painted hall with exposed beams and wooden harnesses to hold the cows in place while milking. Handling the Brown Swiss bovines is tricky because of their horns. Although mythology tells us horns depict strength and virility, these shiny, regal spikes are dangerous and make it difficult to manage the cows. The cows' horns are said to be integral to their rumen functions where digestive gasses enter the horn cavity and revert back to aid the cow's digestion, ultimately producing quality raw milk. For Rockefeller, seeing young Triform residents milking the cows actively counters the harsh, isolated life of the farmer. "It becomes a different scene where one or two are milking and others are cleaning up. It's not a lonely situation."

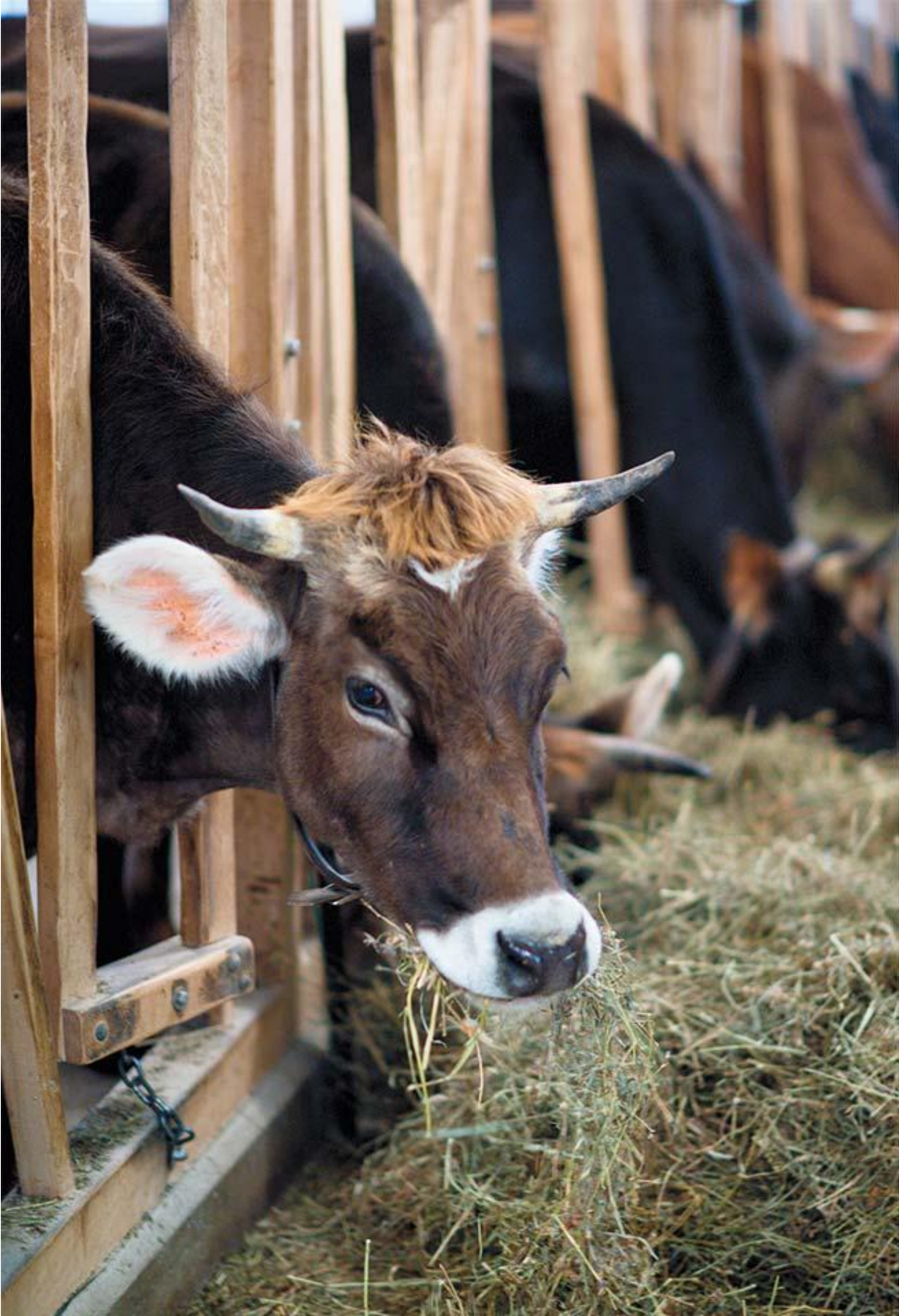
The milk is emptied into stainless-steel tanks in a white tiled room whose arched windows evoke a cloister. So far the raw, unpasteurized milk has been shared with Triform and sold to local customers who bring their own bottles to the dairy. A design for a glass milk bottle reminiscent of the old, basic cone-shaped bottle, is near completion. When the farm is ready to sell the milk publicly it will be certified organic by Demeter, the brand for products of biodynamic agriculture. The only other dairy farm in the state to produce Demeter-certified milk is the Hawthorne Valley Farm in Ghent.

Davis says that one of the first jobs he and Triform residents did for Churchtown was plant a mile-and-a-half-long hedge with thorny shrubs creating a laneway for the cows to guide them out to pasture.

"It's called 'laying the hedge,' which encourages biodiversity and creates a better habitat for the animals." Thorny shrubs planted include hawthorn, locust, hazel and old

sage, all latticed together creating a living fence that no one, especially cows, would want to get close to.

“One of the big food issues we are facing is the regulatory attitude toward fresh, raw unprocessed milk,” says Rockefeller. “What it really comes down to is how we produce the milk and its overall affect on keeping the quality of carbon in the soil. There is a growing number of people who know that, and it feels like a seismic shift in the orientation for big organic.”



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DAIRY HORIZONS

The farmhouse, a long, perpendicular arm reaching out from the round barn, has two floors and much of the material came from a reclaimed 1839 farmhouse Anderson found in New Hampshire. The state-of-the-art kitchen, which Anderson likes to describe as “simple and farmy,” is sleekly designed with white tile and black slate. Adjacent to the kitchen is a space likely to become a farm store. Upstairs, craggy wooden beams intersect an airy white painted attic space, and there is a guest bedroom suite. Bathrooms throughout the farmhouse feature Clivus Multrum–brand composting toilets, an alternate sewage treatment system Rockefeller has for decades advocated, citing the many negative impacts conventional sewage treatments have on our water, aquifer systems and the environment.

Rockefeller envisions other facets of the farm to include a coffeehouse where people can hang out and talk and a farm store where Churchtown Dairy milk and cheeses are sold. “I would love to see this as a community center,” she says. “But it will take the right person to manage all the pieces of the farm together. Ultimately I would also like it to be a community of enterprises. Right now, I haven’t figured out exactly how do to that.”

An underground cavern for aging Churchtown Dairy cheese abuts the side of the round barn. “The cave will have a fanfare of vaulted arches,” Anderson explains. A spiral staircase winds down beneath the earth to a brick-walled storage room where the air is cool and damp. Ultimately Anderson plans on covering the external part of the cavern with a large mound of dirt. Two more farmhouses will be built in the coming year slated to be dorm space for farm and cheese workers. The community has embraced the Churchtown Dairy now that it has been up and running for almost one year, and Davis sees a healthy collaborative effort for the future. “The farm can offer something for everybody, especially for our residents who are offered real life experiences to shape them and give them a sense of self. Working in partnership with

Churchtown is working in the wider community. That means we are part of something bigger.”

For Rockefeller, the Churchtown Dairy is at the beginning of its journey to becoming a fully functional dairy farm. “It’s fun to watch its progress, which is very slow, but it is moving along. We are learning what it takes to make all the parts work together and what options we have for the future.” As for the other 2,500 acres where farms once flourished, Rockefeller says her brother David and sister Peggy are now involved in transitioning the land to bring it alive and make it productive. “When my mother bought those farms she undertook to save and preserve the land. In turn, it has made me focus on bringing organic and certified biodynamic practices to this area. It is my mother’s legacy. That’s why I’m here.”